

Book Review

Transnational Audiences: Media Reception on a Global Scale by Adrian Athique

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Book review

Transnational Audiences: Media Reception on a Global Scale. Adrian Athique, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press. 2016. 224 pp. \$69.95 hbk. \$24.95 pbk. \$19.99 ebk.

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We live in the era of big data where “a handful of Internet companies now know more about the behavioral patterns of media audiences than every single academic researcher in the world combined and working in harmonious union” (p. 160), so it does not really make sense for media scholars to compete with the tech companies in what they do best. Instead Adrian Athique, Associate Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia, suggests that we start our research of transnational audiences at the individual level:

“The conceptual challenge is how to situate the individuals and the social formations encapsulated in big data (. . .) What kinds of social imagination are being fostered by the primacy of data, and

how will they differ from the human relationships that have been conceived through the preceding eras of reading and viewing?" (p. 185).

The aim of transnational audience research is, according to Athique, to gain an understanding of the full "spectrum" of how audiences engage in different forms of communication and how they make sense of the varied content in the material environment where reception takes place -- surrounded by other people as well as imagined relationships. From Athique's point of view, culture is "manifest" imagination, and since we all participate in the process from our unique position within the whole, it is constantly evolving. Media contribute to the transformation of social imagination in any given society, both because they provide information and because they make it possible for audiences to perceive an increased number of relationships. The individual media user is aware what other people are doing, and in this outward-looking process will situate himself or herself relative to how other people articulate themselves. So even at individual level, subjectivity is not static, but tends "to move" (p. 176).

To help us better grasp the concept, Athique introduces a cricket ground a metaphor in which the ball represents the mediated message, the stroke is the reception, and audiences are the players who move around in the field, keenly aware what other players are doing. The metaphor is presented as a "reworking" of Bourdieu's cultural field, and in this reworking, the individual perspective is in the forefront. It sounds like a 2016 echo of the liberal fathers when Athique writes: "that everyone's worldview matters. Not because we are individuated subjects living under our own cloud, but because our relative perception of the world shapes our social actions at every scale" (p. 188).

The fundamental questions discussed throughout this highly informative and well-structured book are the ontology and epistemology of transnational audiences, which makes it very useful to researchers and graduate students in their efforts to conceptualize the object of study. Many exciting theories and concepts are discussed. For example, 1) Is a nation or a society based on shared memories, ethnicity, language, links to a given land, and/or mental images? 2) How do media contribute to society building, including regional and global societies? 3) How useful are propositions of cultural geography, including concepts like “geolinguistic regions,” “media civilizations,” and “zones of consumption”?

Referring to other scholars, Athique also discusses how transnational audiences must not only be able to understand the language of a media product but also to “appreciate the themes, motifs and moods through which its narrative structure express the wider culture of each geolinguistic region” (p. 120). Adding such a deeper level of analysis to the study of transnational audiences makes it more rewarding for scholars to study how and why media content flow between cultures and across borders than the numbers alone.

It is inspiring to read Athique’s discussions of outstanding scholarly work in the field. Clearly, the media users in the transnational world can be called many names, e.g. diasporic, art-house, global, resident, national, and cross-over audiences. Athique warns against drawing conclusions about audiences based on studies of single media, such as web-communities for people with special interests or ethnicity, because most people get information from many other sources as well. Especially, Athique writes, in an era of “resurgent ethno-nationalism” scholars should be “wary of the ethnic microcosms” both because it is “a politically dangerous approach” and because “in

practice diasporic audiences consume a lot of media in which they have no ethnic investment” (p. 94).

What Atihque seems to find most rewarding for media scholars is assessing the “broader pattern of media consumption” (p. 130) within linguistic and geographic locations. Digital tools can help us as researchers get a better understanding of key concepts like interactivity, community, crowd, networks, public and how media content flows across nations. And according to Athique, we cannot ignore the “capacity to grasp the depth and scope of transnational social interactions in a digital age.” (p. 169).

Teachers in subjects like Public Diplomacy, International Communication, Corporate Communication, and Media Reception will probably find this book useful when preparing their lectures. I will bring it around campus the coming semester for that same reason.